

Spinning Research

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Oxford University put out a page in May of this year, relating to a grandiose project entitled ‘Transforming 19th-Century Historically-Informed Performance’, which has been awarded a major grant (£1 million) by the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

Whether the writing and quotations from investigators in this article does justice to the nature or scope of the project I cannot be sure, but the article certainly does reveal how empty and self-undermining can be various research projects which are publicly defined by their spin rather than apparent content.

I believe it is worth unpacking the description, which I will attempt to do here:

The research will help today’s professional performers and music college students understand more about 19th-century style, and will offer them new approaches to the preparation of music for performance, as well as expanding their expressive possibilities.

That much seems fine and worthy – researching an area of performance style in such a way as might be useful for professional and student performers. This in itself is far from new, though; there is a large body of work on this subject in several language by a wide range of scholars (examples would include Clive Brown, Will Crutchfield, Jean-Jacques Eigeldinger, Martha Elliott, Dana Gooley, Philip Gossett, Kenneth Hamilton, Hans-Joachim Hinrichsen, Johann Hüttner, George Kennaway, Daniel J. Koury, Colin Lawson, David Milsom, David Montgomery, Michael Musgrave, Robert Philip, Clemens Risi, Sarah Potter, Robin Stowell and to a lesser degree myself), not to mention a wider range of literature on performance conditions, programming, acoustics, audience habits, and much more.

So what is different about this project? We read:

The project’s Principal Investigator, Claire Holden, said: ‘Contemporary performances of C19th repertoire by specialist ‘period instrument’ ensembles reflect little of what is known about historical style. Many aspects of C19th style are fundamentally at odds with the habits and expectations of modern day performers and audiences, conservatoire training and methods of performance preparation.

None of the above scholars, nor anyone else who has studied the subject, would I believe seriously dispute the second sentence above (but some might question the degree). But the first sentence suggests a wider attack on contemporary ‘specialist ‘period instrument’ ensembles’ – which of these does Claire Holden mean? The *Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment*, perhaps (of which – see below – she has been a member for 16 years. Is this a principled but scathing critique of the very institution which has provided her with a salary for an extended period)? Or the Belgian orchestra *Anima Eterna*, directed by Jos van Immerseel? Or the *Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique*, as directed by John Eliot Gardiner? Or period instrument string quartets such as *Quatuor Mosaïques* or the *Eroica Quartet*? Or the

mixed ensemble *Hausmusik*? All of these have presented a wide range of performances of nineteenth-century music using period instruments, all quite differently, but mostly in ways which constitute distinct breaks with other extant performing traditions for this music (in terms of tempo, timbre, approaches to vibrato, portamento, articulation, instrumental technique, and various else, as well as fundamental conception as manifested in the work), at least at the times of their pioneering work. However, in some cases other supposedly ‘mainstream’ performers and groups have changed their own styles, in a productive spirit of cross-fertilisation.

But in the absence of any names (and those above are amongst the most prominent), nor any specifics about which aspects of ‘historical style’ (on which these groups will by no means necessarily agree) reflect ‘little of what is known’, this appears to me like a convenient straw target, in order to be able to assert ‘everyone else before us was wrong, only we can be right’? Why should anyone believe that at this early stage in a project, Holden and her co-investigators are already so considerably more enlightened than all of the many others who have researched C19th performance style and/or attempted to respond to historical information about this style in their work?

Furthermore – and this makes me question the status of this project as ‘research’ – is Holden not pre-empting the results of the research, asserting *a priori* that ‘Many aspects of C19th style are fundamentally at odds with the habits and expectations of modern day performers and audiences’? Surely this is a hypothesis to be proved or disproved (or, likely, somewhere in between) by research – otherwise why bother doing the research at all?

The article goes on to say:

As a result, “period” ensembles are finding it more and more difficult to maintain a distinct identity in a marketplace where they are increasingly in direct competition with ‘modern’ orchestras – often playing the same repertoire with the same conductors and soloists in a similar style.

It is not difficult to observe how some ‘modern’ orchestras have adapted and moved away from some stylistic norm which had greater traction several decades ago, and adopted aspects of style which were bequeathed by period groups like some of those mentioned above. Many conductors associated with ‘period performance’ – including Nikolaus Harnoncourt, John Eliot Gardiner, Roger Norrington and others – have worked with long-established orchestras, whilst others – for example Charles Mackerras or Simon Rattle – have been eager to take on board some of the achievements of period performers, even when working with modern instruments. All of this has been observed and documented over several decades by most scholarly commentators on the subject, with some (such as Colin Lawson and Robin Stowell in their *The Historical Performance of Music: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 153-154) noting the blurring of the clear line between ‘period’ and ‘mainstream’ performance that Laurence Dreyfus observed in his 1983 article ‘Early Music Defended Against its Devotees’, *Musical Quarterly* 49 (1983), pp. 297-322. This is hardly news, what matters is how this might form the basis for some new research questions.

The aim of this project is to engage performers and audiences in a re-invigoration of the ways in which C19th music is performed, by focusing on how this music is

prepared for performance. We will use historical knowledge not for prescriptive ends but to open up a wide variety of radical performance and pre-performance practices.

I do not know of many scholars of C19th HIP who would claim that they are using historical knowledge for prescriptive ends, though the earlier text in this article suggests a negative view of what all others have done with such knowledge (or even a suggestion that they are unaware of it, which is ludicrous), which appears quite prescriptive to me.

But how do these scholars know in advance that the results will be ‘radical’? What if the data suggested that some of the historical practices were moderately conservative? Once again, if the conclusions are known in advance, why bother do the research?

In essence, the text above seems to be saying that this is a study of C19th rehearsal and practice techniques. This is a very worthy and important area of study, but would not have sounded so flashy when spun to research funding bodies like the AHRC.

Transforming C19th HIP will address these questions through scholarly research, empirical investigation, and practical enquiry and experimentation, combining historical performance and performance studies scholarship in a significant long-term research project.

Once again, this says little which could not have been said about the majority of previous scholarship on the subject.

The project has two partner organisations: the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment; and the Royal Academy of Music.

Professor Eric Clarke, Oxford University’s Heather Professor of Music and the project’s Co-Investigator, said: ‘The project is going to employ a very exciting combination of historical, practical and empirical methods, and will be thoroughly engaged with a world-leading HIP orchestra and its audience, and with the students and staff of a world-leading conservatoire.

Run that by me again? I had thought this project set itself up in opposition to ‘Contemporary performances of C19th repertoire by specialist ‘period instrument’ ensembles’ which ‘reflect little of what is known about historical style.’? But there is a ‘world-leading HIP orchestra’ involved – specifically the OAE? Are they an exception to this rule (which would suggest some problem with the rule, as they are one of the most prominent such ensembles), or might they be hauled over the coals as a result of the research? Holden, the Principal Investigator, **has been a member of the OAE since 2000, as revealed by her biography** – will she subject her own employer to the same level of critical scrutiny as she alleges is required for other (unnamed) ensembles? And we are meant to be impressed by the mention of ‘students and staff of a world-leading conservatoire’ (the RAM), when ‘conservatoire training’ was earlier cited as as leading reason for the problem?

We read in this text a rather shallow attempt to spin a project as being in striking opposition to the practices of established groups, but then it also needs the prestige of a major orchestra and conservatoire to lend it legitimacy. The irony of this is glaring.

As I said earlier, this description may not do justice to the project, and may simply be a misguided promotional piece about a project which is considerably better framed. In this form, I cannot understand why this would have received 'a large Research Grant', and wonder if the obtaining of such grants has become mostly a matter of spin and having the right people associated with a project?

The description of a research project as 'radical' has become so routine as to be manneristic. It appears as if above all everyone looking for grants must present their work as boundary-breaking, iconoclastic, and in drastic opposition to what has come before. Actually there is plenty of important research which has been done and will continue to be done which attempts a nuanced and balanced approach to the data available, and achieves real original contributions to knowledge without always having to pretend that no-one else before had ever contributed anything of significance. The attention-seeking, pseudo-radical rhetoric in this article borders on the infantile.

Addendum: Looking at another associated project with the same PI, I read the following:

Consequently, true 19th-century practices have never been fully explored or realised, and familiar, secure, yet inaccurate 'modern' techniques such as off-string bowings have been the default directive. Whilst recordings of Beethoven's Symphonies (e.g. by Gardiner, Hogwood and Norrington) are well respected and certainly offer interpretative insights, their acceptance as definitive examples of historical performance in this repertoire is misguided and dangerous. The string playing does not follow either technically or stylistically the conventions that were natural to performers of that time.

Here we are back to the sort of stentorian rhetoric about accuracy and authenticity that has been said to be a feature of the bad old days. To describe performances, or the reception thereof, as 'misguided and dangerous', not to mention further claims about 'there have been no recorded or concert performances which have given any meaningful realisation of early 19th-century string playing', or how '19th-century performance practices continue to be grossly misrepresented', all sounds very 'prescriptive' to me. Again, this seems a spin on 'all the others have got it wrong, only my group can get it right'. With various issues which should be the subject of critical research questions (e.g. the prevalence of off-string bowings) presented as established truth.

A lot of critical methodological reflection on historical performance has concluded that various aspects of performance from eras before the advent of recording are difficult to discern with any certainty, and the results will inevitably be rather provisional and inexact. Yet when some performers wish to claim that existing species of historical performance have got it wrong, they speak in the language of absolute truth. Some humility here would not go amiss.